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Military Personnel Levels: Bloated or Needed for the Job?

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The current pressure to reduce the rate of growth in defense spending has motivated some proponents of a strong military to seek ways to cut defense expenditures without affecting what they see as the "muscle" of the program. Unfortunately, such efforts are rarely successful, and usually result in inefficient reductions. This occurs because the reductions focus upon a few specific areas of national defense that appear not to contribute as much as others. Such disproportionate reductions lead to imbalances. These reductions ultimately come at a greater cost in terms of defense effectiveness than would more balanced reductions.

A prime example of unwise defense cuts is the proposal by Sen. Warren Rudman

(R., N.H.) to reduce defense expenditures through large reductions in manpower. He would not only deny the Defense Department the strength increases requested in the fiscal 1986 budget to operate and maintain the new weapons systems currently entering the force, but would also cut military and civilian manpower in "support" activities by 10% from fiscal 1985 levels.

It is easy to forget that of all the defense problems that existed when the Reagan administration entered office, none was more serious or required more urgent attention than manpower in our armed services. The turnaround in personnel readiness since 1980 has exceeded even our most optimistic expectations. Defense manpower is the biggest success story of the Reagan administration.

Under Sen. Rudman's proposal, all civilians are defined as "support," and all military manpower accounted for under the Defense Planning and Programming Categories of "support" and "auxiliary" would be included as "support." A 10% cut in "support" from the fiscal 1985 level would amount to a reduction of about 76,000 active military personnel and 104,000 civilians. Manpower levels would revert to about where they were when the Reagan administration assumed office. However, since the force structure is larger than in 1981, manpower readiness would be less than it was four years ago.

A clear implication of Sen. Rudman's proposal is that manpower, particularly manpower in activities labeled "support," contributes much less to national defense than do other areas. I cannot accept the underlying premise.

Included in "support" are people who provide the essential services necessary to maintain, deploy and sustain the strategic and tactical/mobility forces that are popularly considered to be the fighting edge of U.S. forces. They are the people who operate bases, repair runways, recruit and train new people, repair equipment, operate depots, provide communications and intelligence services, and staff military hospitals. The lack of these support people would reduce the effectiveness of our fight-

ing force just as surely as would deficiencies in weapons systems. In the end, soldiers, sailors and airmen would have to be drawn from the strategic and tactical/mobility forces to perform essential support functions. In the event of war, this could be a serious shortcoming.

The idea of cutting "support" also appears to be based upon a notion that the Defense Department manpower system is inefficient, allocating too many resources to support, and that this "waste" can be costlessly eliminated simply by mandating arbitrary cuts. This is incorrect. Since 1980, the department has allocated three times more of its manpower increase to strategic and tactical/mobility forces than to support and auxiliary activities.

Moreover, we have created a decentralized process for rooting out inefficiencies at the local level. The problem with attempting to improve efficiency through large-scale reductions imposed from above is that there is insufficient detailed information to ensure that only the fat will be cut, and the incentives are not there for those who do have the information to provide it. But through programs that emphasize decentralized decision-making and positive incentives and competition, we are able to provide the taxpayer with an efficient manpower program.

When Congress decides what level of resources it will provide to the Defense Department, it should avoid the temptation to focus differentially on particular aspects of national defense, such as manpower. It should, instead, let the Defense Department maintain a proper program balance between manpower and hardware, and thereby achieve the greatest return for the resources provided.

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